CULTURAL CONNECTIONS:
AN ALTERNATIVE TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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In today's increasingly polyglot classrooms, interpersonal and inter-group conflicts often arise out of mutual misunderstandings between different collections of students, some based on language or status differences but many more generated by emotionally charged misconceptions. These latter types of conflicts can relate to perceived interpersonal differences, or they may be the result of ostensible racial, class, or cultural differences (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

In a standard pattern of potential conflicted interactions, Vietnamese students can challenge Hmong students, or Latino students may feel disrespected by their African American peers. These patterns can be repeated for as many distinct groups as are present in a given classroom or school.

Similar concerns about alleviating mounting inter-group tensions have led to a renewed emphasis on combating bullying, teasing and harassment at all school levels (Coloroso, 2003). However, research has shown that there are some significant differences between conflicts that are personality- or class-based and those that are culture-based (Casella, 2000; Scott, 2003; Webster, 1993).

Because today's students inhabit a more globalized environment where the borders of any given location can be transcended with the click of a computer icon, it

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is more important than ever that students learn to be aware about and sensitized to the cultural lives of the other students with whom they interact. As leaders of and decision makers about the kind of education our children are exposed to, we have a unique opportunity to teach our students more about the world by encouraging them to understand the potential educational value of recognizing that some inter-group conflicts are culture-based and may be amenable to resolution through better inter-group understanding and appreciation for the world's different cultures.

Rather than turning immediately to conflict resolution strategies that often encourage a negotiated truce between individual students (Johnson & Johnson, 1996), we should encourage teachers, administrators, and students to consider cultural connection as a viable alternative, particularly for situations where the problematic interactions between students arise from more entrenched differences between groups of students.[1]

Gay (2000) has argued for culturally responsive teaching because: (1) the students' culture is important, and consequently education is a socio-cultural process that requires understanding and appreciation of the culture of our students; (2) historically, education reform has misguidedly focused on student achievement by "divorcing it from other factors that affect achievement, such as culture, ethnicity and personal experience;" (3) despite the best intentions, being color blind is not the same as being culturally responsive;

(4) cultural diversity is a positive force; and (5) for the most part, measurement of successful teaching that considers only test scores and grades misses the root causes of any minority achievement gap (p. 12).

According to Gay, "both immigrant and native-born students of color may also encounter prejudices, stereotyping, and racism that have negative impacts on their self-esteem, mental health, and academic achievement" (p. 18). To counteract the negative responses to cultural differences we must provide avenues for positive interactions to facilitate understanding and conciliation among our students. According to Valenzuela (1999),

> Were [minority and immigrant] youth to experience a politics of shared material or cultural interests, the mirror image of the politics of difference, their relationships would likely improve. They might even redirect their emotions and focus on the role of the school's assimilationist curriculum in promoting the confusion and conflict that surrounds their sense of identity. (p. 170)

Conflict Resolution: The Traditional Intervention

There is sufficient evidence accumulated now to conclude that traditional approaches to resolve inter-group conflict can be beneficial when contentious group interactions arise from struggles based on personal or group identification (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). When individual differences represent the principal cause of conflict between students, conflict resolu-

tion strategies often may prove salubrious and can have some secondary gains for the wider community (Webster, 1993).

However, no reliable evidence has demonstrated that conflict resolution has any lasting impact on ameliorating more longstanding differences such as racial, gender, or cultural prejudices that represent social and systemic problems that can readily manifest themselves in interpersonal conflicts. If the underlying causes for some interpersonal conflicts are not remedied, then the superficial resolution of conflict between individual students will likely provide only temporary relief from the real conflict.

For example, when Vietnamese and Hmong students who get into conflict are able to share the experience of being minorities in American classrooms and society, they can discover an immediate connection with African American and Latino students who may also experience feeling different from the mainstream life of the school. In this simple way, the common experience of being a minority in the school environment can be a vehicle for connecting students who may feel otherwise isolated, bitter, or misunderstood (Scott, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999).

As may be the case with conflicts based on racial or class differences, cultural conflicts can occur due to the aversive effects of negative stereotypes or inaccurate portrayals of a particular group that are conveyed through the media, and then passively or outwardly sanctioned by our school environments and home settings. Because of the changing demographics of the immigrant population of students attending school in the U.S, such culturally-laden inter-group conflicts may predominate in our inner-city schools, but they also are surfacing in suburban areas, sometimes after quietly incubating for a time in these generally more privileged environments (Ogbu, 2003).

Whatever their origins, however, because of mounting inter-group tensions in our schools, and the tragic possibility of erupting violence, more than ever before in our history conflict resolution, peer mediation, and peaceful solutions to student arguments and fights are needed. In addition to these traditional methods, we have found that there are multiple techniques for engaging students in the effort to discover commonalities with other young people who may at first appear different from them.

Theory and Design:
The Power of Cultural Connection

To assess whether cultural connection represents a viable alternative to conflict resolution in helping to ameliorate strained interactions between a group of African and African American students, we designed a study of conflicted interactions that can illustrate some of these alternative pathways. What we found were several interconnected methods for engaging students in recognizing that the differences that they perceive are largely based on myths, misperceptions, or stereotypes.

Most of these prejudicial beliefs that can divide the student population are subject to modification once an effort is made to develop more understanding and appreciation for what students share in common, rather than emphasizing what factors they believe make them different.

We started with a narrative about a shared historical track, which for many African Americans means learning about the real history of slavery and its impact on the Africans and the Americans who are the product of its legacy. This also had a corresponding positive impact on the African students who were largely unaware of the kind of historical misunderstanding prevalent among African American students regarding the role that slavery played in African history itself.

Recent research indicates that African and African American students, when brought together around a shared heritage, can become eager to learn about other commonalities between them. Shared experiences evolve from learning about the African heritage these students share which diverges from the common misperceptions many of the African American students maintain in the absence of an active engagement with the history of Africa. This learning is enhanced immeasurably when these students have the benefit of direct contact with African students.

Asante has championed Afrocentricity as a model to elucidate some of the African cultural motifs that have been carried over into new environments, including the United States, by African immigrants. According to Afrocentrism, to know one's self the individual must understand and appreciate the cultural history of one's people (Asante, 1991). Asante (1998) explicitly has stated that when exploring the history of African Americans, we should view this history from a specifically African center (p. 2). Afrocentricity can be particularly relevant to inform the teaching of many subjects, particularly for the students in our urban schools.

Much has been written about the importance of a culturally relevant education, and Afrocentric education has been discussed and studied for many years. To be Afrocentric, it is not required that one be African, and simply being an African or African American does not guarantee an Afrocentric outlook (Asante, 1990). An Afrocentric worldview can best be embraced by immersion in African culture and by accepting African values as the norm. Afrocentricity continues to evolve into a method and approach for conducting and analyzing any study of people of African descent.

Afrocentricity can be the ideological and curricular vehicle that has positive effects on conflictual relationships between African and African American students. In discovering their commonalities and learning more about themselves, their shared backgrounds, the African worldview, and their similarities as African or African American individuals, the students come to realize that they have more links between them than they had imagined possible coming from such seemingly different backgrounds. They can use their experiences to enlighten others who experience conflict due to cultural differences.

The true value of this form of culturally relevant teaching derives from understanding and appreciating the significant contribution of culture in facilitating high quality teaching and learning that ultimately can aid in creating a more just society. Multiculturalism and Afrocentricity are critical tools to guide the types of activities provided to students when the goal is to enrich their mutual understanding of diverse backgrounds.

In the absence of true immersion in the African culture, having positive reading material accessible is one path we discovered that could encourage more open dialogue between African American and African students. Positive material about Africa and people of African descent portrays commonalities and de-emphasizes differences so that the conversation can move from what separates and divides into what facilitates emotional bonding and enhances creative thinking patterns.

Once the dialogue gets started, another path is to facilitate the dissemination of the conversation. More students naturally become engaged as word spreads about some of the benefits gained by members of one group interacting with and learning about the other. Like the proverbial snowball rolling down a hill, once a critical mass of students becomes engaged in this type of positive dialogue, the natural inclination is to share with even more students. We learned that isolated dialogue, no matter how powerful, has no room to effect change until it is more widely shared, but we also learned that the message becomes too attenuated when the group is too large.

Data Analysis:
African Students
and Their African American Peers

At one public high school studied, the African immigrant and refugee students were teased and harassed by their African American peers (Traoré & Lukens, 2006). In the same inner-city community, administrators at the local middle school encountered similar forms of student harassments, which were disrupting the daily interchanges in that school. In an effort to alleviate this tension, the middle school's administrators elected to implement conflict resolution as their principal intervention.

Grant funding provided them with the opportunity to use conflict resolution support, with mixed results. At the high school level, where there were similar recurring episodes of conflict between African American and African students, in a predominantly minority school, an intervention was introduced that was culture-based rather than derived from more traditional conflict resolution strategies.

The intervention was informed by an appreciation for the potential impact of enabling the students to discover the shared heritage between African and African American students (Ladner, 1998). The researcher proposed that once the students had re-discovered that they had some commonalities, including a shared cultural heritage of African descent, this would bring the students together and harmonize their strained interactions.

This study was composed of a self-selected group of 16 African and 15 African American students, almost equally split between male and female. A cross-section of age groups was selected in order to compensate for the potential for age- or grade-related distinctions, such as competition among high school seniors engaged in the extracurricular process of applying for college. The African students represented several countries from the continent, and this demographic allowed for some heterogeneity within the "African" experiences that the students could share.

The interventions comprised five activities that addressed the myths, misperceptions, and stereotypes that appeared to be keeping these two groups of students from understanding each other. The students were guided in an exploration of the misconceptions and their sources—which they discovered to consist of the school environment itself, as well as the students' homes and the media. One result of this process was that the students were ready to begin getting to know each other as cultural beings and to find areas of com-mon values and beliefs. Discovering that there was a common cultural connection between them encouraged the students to learn even more.

Connecting African
and African American Students:
The Language You Cry In

The initial spark used to ignite the flame of cultural re-connection among the students was a film called *The Language You Cry In: The Story of a Mende Song*. In compelling narrative form, this film tells a very touching story that bridges the historical gap between Africa and America at the level of the heart. Segments of this film interweave the lives of Africans and African Americans in such a way that the film as a whole highlights for many of the students how traversable the previously enormous chasm between the two groups of students actually could be.

After viewing this film, and sharing their experience with each other in ongoing dialogue afterward, this group of high school students enthusiastically acknowledged a number of shared connections, from the scenes in the film of rice growing, to the white used in burial ceremony, to the crossing over the water, through to the oral tradition and the communication potential of song that each had experienced in some form over the course of their young lives.

Reading as a Mechanism
for Discovering
Cultural Connections

In a manner similar to the transforming images conveyed in *The Language You Cry In*, reading literature that conveys positive images about a particular group can also be a critical element in having students discover a cultural connection with that group. In our study, for instance, reading about their shared heritage was an important component of the cultural conflict intervention that was catalyzed by our sharing the film.

There are literally hundreds of books written by African and African American authors that provide a more accurate presentation of their history and culture. Although these books may be represented in school or local libraries, we have found that too many students do not know how to, or actually cannot, access them.

One librarian at a predominantly African American school we visited told us that she makes the books available on a cart in the library during Black History Month; another at a different school described culturally relevant material by African American authors as limited to book about "drugs, thugs and gangs."

Incorporating the Personal
in the Cultural Connection

Another path to effective cultural connecting is the process of discovering the personal connections through one-on-one conversations and/or interviews that focus on both difference and shared values. This process is beneficial not only for helping to resolve conflicts between students, but it also can aid teachers in having a fuller appreciation for the unique qualities each of their students brings to the task of learning (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Murrell, 2002).

For many immigrant children, America has seemed almost otherworldly, an illusive land of plenty. But through its representations in the media around the world, America also has attained Janus-faced characteristics: there is the America of the rich, and then there exists the America of the poor. Although many Africans believe when they get to America they will be embraced by the America of the wealthy, they sadly discover that they are much more likely to be associated with groups of poor African Americans.

In addition, before arriving in the United States, many of the African students have learned only negative stereotypes about African Americans. Through films and other media they have been encouraged to believe that many African Americans are criminals or welfare recipients. Or they are duped into naively believing that all Americans are White, and there are no Black Americans.

Because many immigrants do not arrive in America instantly fitting financially into the wealthy American category, the immigrants who share an African heritage with African Americans have sometimes believed it necessary to distinguish themselves from African Americans in a number of intangible ways that their skin color does not make manifest (Traoré & Lukens, 2006: Ogbu & Simons, 1998). For African students it can be disconcerting to learn that they are judged by Americans based on surface appearances, or that African Americans who share some of the same surface characteristics do not seem to appreciate the similarities.

Myths that Impede
Cultural Connections

For their part, African American students (like many American students more generally) are susceptible to some longstanding mythology about Africa—e.g., the "dark continent," where animals roam

wild, and men swing among the trees on hanging vines. Some prevalent stereotypes include notions like jungles abound and all Africans live in huts.

For both the African American students and their African peers, getting beyond these types of group stereotypes that interfere with the genuine appreciation of individual characteristics and emotional connection can be accomplished only by identifying the shared values and acknowledging the individual human being, in contrast to the stereotyped group differences.

In addition, making a personal connection with their students and emphasizing fairness for all students has the potential to alter teachers' perceptions of their pedagogical role. Teachers need to appreciate the benefits in seeing difference in all of its munificence; only by understanding and fully appreciating the difference each student brings can teachers guide their students to recognizing the commonalities (Nieto, 1992, 1999). Differences matter, but they can matter positively only if they are balanced with fairness and equity (Lewis, 2003; Minow, 1990; Moses, 2002).

The final path in our study required the students to confront how they had learned what they thought they "knew" about members of the other group, and how they could un-learn or change their perceptions based on more accurate information. We believe that our students need to be encouraged to think about what information they have inherited from their surroundings and what information they can learn anew. To the extent that the home and school environments reinforce the stereotypes of the society at large, the less useful will be any intervention in alleviating inter-group conflicts among students. Group think has no place in any effective measure to modify antagonistic behavior that gains force from that very same group thinking (Castano & Yzerbyt, 1998; Janis, 1982).

When home and school are in accord with how our children are expected to interact, there is a greater chance that deviations from this expectation can be challenged successfully and students may learn to be self-monitoring. Where there exists discord between the expectations of home and school, the inter-group tensions are provided fuel to ferment and they have a greater chance of becoming exacerbated (Marx & Stapel, 2006). When reinforced by the media, negative stereotypes that are perpetuated in this kind of discordant environment increase the chances that inter-group tensions will erupt, and then the school environment can become like a battleground.

Expanding the Cultural Connection Vehicle

A very important recommendation from the students who participated in this intervention was "A crowd don't learn." The students warned against trying to do cultural connecting en masse. They worked in small groups that allowed for time and opportunity to talk with each other in more personal interchanges.

The students themselves learned that although they yearned to share their experience and sense of connection with each other, to keep the dialogue fresh and growing they needed to maintain a level of interpersonal intimacy that was diminished when too many students tried to share all at one time. Voices got drowned out, misunderstandings re-surfaced, and their excitement of sharing connections decreased, which eventually meant "business as usual" —to the chagrin of these students.

Tools that Facilitate the Cultural Connection

Some examples of activities and tools that are useful for generating the kind of cultural connecting discussed in this article include "My Favorite Poem Project," a web-based project that publishes poetry representing many different cultural groups. On this website are videos showing individuals (not necessarily from the same group) who express how they were moved by a particular poem.

For example, after reading "Minstrel Man," a poem by Langston Hughes, a young girl from Cambodia, born in Thailand, now living in the U.S. movingly expressed how she felt that this poem had captured her experiences so effectively. This is the type of cross-cultural connection that can help students see their shared experiences of struggle.

For films projecting similar cultural connecting experiences, there is *Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement—Taking Back the Schools*, which tells the story of the walkouts in East Los Angeles. This same story recently was revived in an HBO version titled *Walkout*. African American students were astonished to learn for probably the first time about the struggles of the Mexican American students during the 1960s, which had uncanny similarities to their own struggles at that time. This kind of ah-ha awakening can lead to some open communications across the emotionally volatile Black-Latino divide that has sublimated the shared commitment between these minority groups for equal rights. Seeing the leadership of Mexican American

students in the struggle for civil rights places both African American and Mexican American students in a shared context to establish their freedom to function as they self-determine in American society.

What makes these kinds of cultural connection interventions so effective are the myriad ways in which students learn to appreciate their differences in the context of mutual understanding that can develop through discovering what they share in common with groups of students who at first appear very different from them. The shared connections that students can experience may be in struggle or oppression or the experience of being an immigrant or in holding a particular worldview, but when we take the time to understand someone else's values, beliefs, practices—which all make up culture—then we expand our understanding of our humanity and our connection with the world.

Note

[1] In this article, I use "culture" to refer to the tangible and intangible qualities and artifacts of a group or society that are passed on between generations. This may include the values, traditions, customs, practices, beliefs, and language of a particular collection of people. Cultural connection is used in this article to connote identification with some or all of this collection of group characteristics. Cultural connection can also be the recognition of a shared history, including a history of struggle.

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Cultural Connecting Resources

The Language You Cry In: The Story of a Mende Song. California Newsreel, available for purchase at www.newsreel.org

Chicano! History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement—Taking Back the Schools. NLCC Educational Media, available at http://www.albany.edu/jmmh/vol3/chicano/chicano.html

Favorite Poem Project, available at http://www.faboritepoem.org/theproject/index.html

Walkout. HBO Film, available at www.hbo.com/films/walkout